

Sheriff shortage delays arsonist sentencing and other cases today

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Vancouver police officers look for clues along West Broadway after a 2008 arson that resulted in an explosion at a Vancouver fast-food restaurant that damaged neighbouring businesses.

VANCOUVER - A judge had some blunt criticism of B.C.'S attorney general after a shortage of sheriffs delayed an arson sentencing and other cases today.

The shortage forced five cases to be in front of the same judge at Vancouver provincial court at 222 Main.

"The situation in this building is unsustainable right now and for the next two days," Judge Gregory Rideout said this morning.

"And it demands attention from the attorney general."

The judge said he expects more delays and priority would be given to in-custody cases.

The union representing sheriffs says the shortage is being caused by government cutbacks.

Attorney General Barry Penner said last week that he is concerned about the problem of serious criminal cases being delayed, but said there was no more money available in a tight economy.

The arson case was delayed this morning by about an hour, but now is going ahead.

Defence lawyer Russ Chamberlain said delays in the courts can lead to accused people applying for charges to be dropped because their constitutional rights have been violated.

The Charter of Rights of Freedoms guarantees accused criminals the right of a speedy trial.

The Supreme Court of Canada has decided crimes should be prosecuted within a year, if possible.

But if the Crown causes a delay of more than 15 months a judge can consider staying charges because of unreasonable trial delay.